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**THE MEMORY OF THE AMERICAN
AND FRENCH REVOLUTIONS IN
WILLIAM BLAKE'S AMERICA: A PROPHECY
AND EUROPE: A PROPHECY**

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Abstract: *The French and American Revolutions were radical historical events of paramount significance for the subsequent fate of the two continents- Europe and America. They entailed deep social changes and fostered revolutionary ideas of freedom and equality that challenged the old hierarchies. William Blake, the English Romantic poet, lived amidst the turmoil and excitement brought by these mnemonically outstanding events- his lifespan comprised both revolutions. This paper sets out to explore his stance towards the French and American Revolutions in two of his prophetic books, Europe: A Prophecy and America: A Prophecy. The books reveal a harmonious blending of historical fact with mythological figures, such as Orc, the outstanding character that represents the revolutionary spirit. In addition, the presence of intertextuality in the poems, besides attesting to the pervasiveness and importance of these cultural upheavals at the time, authorizes subjective poetic memory and contributes to meaning-making, by reference to other works or documents dwelling on similar subjects. Blake recalls the images of noteworthy figures that played a major role in the revolutions; he also invokes sites of memory and scenes of war. Last but not least, the poet calls forth the emotional states dominating the people from both continents. Being an Englishman living in a monarchy, Blake stresses out throughout the books England's attitude and reaction towards the French and American Revolutions, which shows his high concern for the fate of his country. His prophetic writings represent a critical contemplation and interpretation of historical fact, but they also betray a vivid impression imprinted upon his mind. The poet, who was personally affected by censorship and accusations of treason, wrote in order to make meaning of the social and cultural crisis he was witnessing.*

In a 2000 study conducted by an international group of researchers, over 1,300 college students from seven different countries were asked what had been the most important events that had occurred in the last 1000 years. Among the top ten rated historical events were the French Revolution and the American Revolution (Pennebaker, Gonzales 187-188). More than two centuries later, having lost their character of urgency, these historical events survive in the

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collective memory of Americans and Europeans alike because they represent cornerstone points in the construction of their cultural identity. Given the time elapsed, the memory of the revolutions has undergone rethinking and reinterpreting and, as it often happens with historical memories, wounds are healed in time, “positive outcomes are emphasized and costs forgotten” (ibidem 186). This is not valid though in the case of fresh memories of social upheavals, as individuals are constantly assailed with changes they must adapt to and as their sense of security fades away. One wonders what kind of narratives does the witnessing of a prominent and dramatic social event yield. Are people aware of the event’s lasting significance, of the changes it might trigger for the next centuries to come? Are they capable of rendering this event into an objective narrative? Do national, religious, political allegiances influence and mold their narratives and in what way?

William Blake, the English Romantic poet, was born in 1757 and died in 1827. His lifespan comprises both the American and the French Revolutions. The poet lived amidst the turmoil and excitement brought by these mnemonically outstanding events. Though an Englishman, Blake was deeply impressed by the unfolding of the revolutions and highly aware of their impact and resonance throughout the world. Many of his poetic works dwell on revolutionary themes and display the author’s opinions and stance towards the French and American Revolutions. Two of the most representative poems in this sense are *Europe: a Prophecy* and *America: a Prophecy*, written in 1793 and 1794. The books are not prophecies in the conventional sense, as they are written after the facts. As Damon Foster remarks, they are prophecies in the poetic sense because they record the eternal formula for all revolutions (335). In these poems, historical facts are entangled within a mythical framework that is to be found in all of Blake’s prophetic writings. Here mythology functions as an enhancer of the grandeur of historical events and also serves more practical purposes which will be discussed later.

In *America: a Prophecy* Blake renders the confrontation between England and the American colonies as a struggle between rulers thirsty for power and oppressed people seeking liberty and justice. The coast is “glowing with blood” and the Atlantic waves swell “between the gloomy nations” (68). England is represented by the “Guardian Prince of Albion”, and the thirteen rebellious colonies are represented by the thirteen Angels of America. Blake evokes the memory of the powerful and tense emotions that governed each party – England’s tyranny and fury at the disobeying colonists is symbolized by “the sullen fires” of Albion, his “dragon form” (idem), while America’s indignation at the imposed taxes and lack of representatives in the British Government is rendered in the “fiery” descent of the “indignant Angels” from the hills and in the accusatory speeches directed at the “crawling villain” to whom “no more obedience”(72) should be paid. The thirteen Angels “rent off their robes to the hungry wind & threw their golden scepters/ Down on the land of America” (idem) as a sign of protest and forswear of loyalty to the British Crown.

The poem is pretty much a faithful reconstruction of historiography. Blake recalls the images of the founding fathers of America and of other noteworthy

figures that played major roles in the American Revolution: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Mercy Otis Warren, Horatio Gates, John Hancock and Nathanael Greene. These are “warlike men who rise in silent night” (68) to defend the American cause.

The poet also evokes places which function as “lieux de mémoire”, as they preserve the remembrance of glorious battles and events that led to the victory of Americans: “The citizens of New York close their books & lock their chests;/ The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;/ The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the earth;/ The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.” (73) Thus, Boston recalls the reader’s knowledge of the famous Boston Tea Party and of the Boston Massacre, Virginia was the site of the decisive 1781 battle of Yorktown, Pennsylvania was the site of the Continental Congresses and the evocation of New York is meant to allude to the battle of Saratoga in 1777 (u-s-history.com).

Real fact blends harmoniously with mythological figures meant to give an emotional tinge to historical memory. The character Orc represents the revolutionary spirit and is portrayed as chained in the “Preludium” to the poem. He frees himself from the chains and comes to blow the trumpet of war in America: “Sound! Sound! My loud war-trumpets & alarm my thirteen Angels” (70). In the ensuing battle, “all rush together in the night of wrath and raging fire/ The red fires rag’d” (73). The color red symbolizes the animating young spirit of the revolution but it may also refer to the loss of human lives and to bloodshed - a painful and traumatic memory characteristic of every war. The battle between the British and the Americans unfolds in the sky which, as David Erdman remarks, shows that Blake gives cosmic significance to the historical event and to the historical figures involved (165).

Speaking of political and national allegiances, Blake does not fail to depict the difficult dilemma that British soldiers and governors are faced with: whether to follow the orders of their masters from the metropolis and kill their American brethren or to fraternize with them leaving war aside:

(...) the thirteen Governors that England sent (...) they rouze, they cry./ Shaking their mental chains, (...)/ They grovel on the sand and writhing lie, while all/ The British soldiers thro’ the thirteen states sent up a howl/ Of anguish, threw their swords & muskets to the earth & ran (*America* 72).

The passage may be interpreted as the surrender of the British army facing the superior American forces that won the war but it may also signify the British population’s disagreement with England’s war policy and their unwillingness to engage in war. David Erdman notes Blake’s awareness of a mounting tension between peaceful citizens and a tyrant king, George III (12). He states that London was an area of resistance to the court and that citizens of London sympathized with America. War was never popular in English trading centers. Most of the satiric prints of the day were pro-American, representing America as a land of liberty and virtue, England as that of corruption and King George as a cruel and obstinate tyrant (5-6). He supports this view by recalling the Gordon riots in June 1780,

which were the expression of Londoners' wrath and resentment against the war with America. The mob set fire to government properties and institutions, sacked houses of magistrates and burst open the Newgate jail. Erdman seems to suggest that England was on the verge of a revolution during these riots (8-9). If this piece of historical evidence is to be discerned in "America's" passages, it means that Blake's Albion signifies only the monarchical power and will, not the stance of the whole English people, who actually perceived Americans as their brethren and opposed war with America.

As a critique of England's war policy, Blake portrays Albion sending off towards America "his plagues" that "cut off man & beast" (73). But instead of exterminating the Americans, the disease "recoil'd, then roll'd (...) with fury on Albion's Angels", so that they "forsook the frontiers (...) with shame and woe" (*America* 73-74). This denouement indicates Blake's intention of tinting the memory of the defeat of the British with a moralizing tone. The corrupt and greedy England, more precisely, its monarch has to pay for the injustice and tyranny infringed upon the colonies. On another hand, the episode of the disease might be a direct reference to the malaria endemic that hit Cornwallis's army in the battles of 1779-1780. The British soldiers were highly susceptible to the disease, whereas the Continental army enjoyed an advantage, as they had grown up with malaria and acquired resistance. The British army was thus greatly weakened by malaria bouts, which contributed to the victory of Americans (washingtonpost.com).

The poem ends with a look directed towards France and other European countries. After twelve years France receives "the Demon's light" (74), that is, the French Revolution erupts, ending the era of monarchy and instituting republican and democratic ideals from then on. Though the monarchies of Spain, France and Italy witness these changes and their peoples are "filled with blasting fancies and with mildews of despair", they are not ready yet to receive "the fires of Orc" (75).

Blake's narrative emerges out of a combination of accurate historical memory acquired by the poet during his life with fictitious characters and scenes, created by his imagination. However, beside these two elements, the memory of the American Revolution is also constituted with the help of intertextuality. Thus, David Erdman and Northrop Frye identify texts - literary works or documents - that evoke memory resonant with Blake's version and that sustain his mnemonic enterprise. Discussing the symbolism of Orc and that of the dragon form, Northrop Frye suggests that Blake draws upon the Titanic myth and that of the dragon-killing in constructing these two antagonist characters. Orc, the hero of America, is "the power of the human desire to achieve a better world which produces revolution." He resembles a giant, a Titan hostile to sky-gods (monarch) and friendly to man (the people) (206-7). Orc's adversary, the dragon (Albion), stands for darkness, waste, sterility and death. In most stories of dragon-killing, the dragon is laying waste and tyrannizing over a nation. In "America" the dragon is the spirit of English tyranny. Orc emerges as the deliverer and the slayer of the dragon, who thus ends social oppression and brings a renewal of life in society (208-9).

In addition, Erdman notes the similarity between Orc's speech and the content of the Declaration of Independence, whose basic inalienable rights, such as

life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, are rendered by Blake in poetic language. The king's wrathful reply resembles the royal proclamation of August 23, 1775, denouncing "Rebellion...Treasons and Traitorous Conspiracies...against Us, Our Crown and Dignity" (26). The author also notes the echo of Thomas Paine's epithet "sullen fires" from "Common Sense" in Blake's poem. The use of intertextuality serves to justify and authorize poetic subjective memory by reference to historical sources, all the while helping to establish links between apparently disparate elements, which contributes to meaning-making.

In *Europe: a Prophecy*, it is more difficult to distinguish the historical narrative within the mythological envelope. Erdman points to the "cryptic symbolism" of the poem, explaining it as Blake's defensive strategy against the political realities of his time. Blake feared his own republican thoughts would bring him to the scaffold (153). Gilchrist relates that the poet was actually involved in a trial for treason, as he was falsely accused of seditious expressions (197). The episode, though of little consequence, as Blake was acquitted, shows the censorship and charged atmosphere in monarchical Britain as a response to the eruption of the French Revolution. Blake's "involute symbolism" and "obscure manner" represent therefore not only literary techniques, but also cautionary measures.

"Europe" clearly makes reference to the French Revolution of 1789 as Orc is shown to appear "in the vineyards of red France" and unleash the "strife of blood" (84), but the accent falls mainly on the depiction of Britain's reaction and attitude towards it. Northrop Frye discerns a pattern in Blake's revolutionary poetry, namely the presence of two central characters: a protagonist fighting for liberty and an antagonist defending tyranny (180-1). In this poem, Los the prophet is the defender of liberty and revolutionary ideals who praises Orc and wishes to see him "in the hour of bliss" while Enitharmon, his emanation, is the cruel queen of heaven who calls Orc son of her affliction (78, 83). Blake's choice of Los as the pro-revolutionary character is almost predictable, as Los, the embodiment of (poetic) imagination is most likely to be aware of the necessity of social change and political renewal. After all, any revolution begins in the mind, through the release of imagination that envisions the possibility of achieving a better, nobler state of things. Enitharmon, the selfish, self-centered Female Will who defends tyranny, is the archetype of queens, of which Blake was never fond, as he considered them vicious and corrupt. Her daughters whom she calls, Leutha and Elynitria are, according to Erdman, ideal portraits of the queens of France and England that push the youth to war, so that they may have dominion (223).

Both Los and Enitharmon begin to call their children. Whereas Los calls Orc, the revolutionary spirit, Enitharmon calls and praises Rintrah, "furious king", who symbolizes revolutionary wrath. Taken as a reaction of anticipation of an upcoming war, the calling of the children is representative of the way collective memories of historical traumatic events emerge. The richest texture of remembrance is always within family life, remarks Jay Winter (65). Collective memory is formed out and based on individual and family memories. The power of a public event, say war, to remain alive in the memory of a large community consists in its relevance for individuals and families who were involved in the

event and who might have lost a beloved one with that occasion. Public memory lasts “when it draws about overlaps between national history and family history. Most of those who take the time to engage in the rituals of remembrance bring with them memories of family members touched by these vast events” (Winter 71). Beyond pure ideological creeds and convictions, the weight of wars and revolutions is even more pregnant for the parents Los and Enitharmon, as their children are directly connected to them.

Enitharmon’s roll-call of her children is interrupted by her falling into a long sleep, of “eighteen hundred years.” In her dream, she sees:

Shadows of men in fleeting bands upon the winds/ Divide the Heavens of Europe,/ Till Albion’s Angel, smitten with his own plagues, fled with his bands./ The cloud bears hard on Albion’s shore,/ Filled with immortal demons of futurity/ In council gather the smitten Angels of Albion (...) they lay buried beneath the ruins of that hall;/ (...) they arise in pain,/ In troubled mists, o’erclouded by the terrors of struggling times (80).

This is a recollection of the numerous wars against revolutionary France initiated by the monarchies of Europe that feared the spread of the revolution. After the execution of King Louis XVI in January 1793 France engaged in a long war with Great Britain and her allies. Already financially weakened by the war with the American colonies, the England of 1793 faced an “economic disaster” that “overwhelmed the armies of Britain and her allies” (Erdman 210, 201). This explains why the Angels of Albion lie buried in ruins. Nevertheless, “the fiery king” Rintrah “roll’d his clouds of war” (*Europe* 80). In king Rintrah Erdman identifies William Pitt, the prime minister of Britain at the time, who was supported by the Crown (212, 221). King Rintrah’s cited actions refer to the preparations for war and invasion initiated by the English Parliament against revolutionary France.

In spite of the king’s war fervour, the soldiers seem to reluctantly follow him, more out of obligation than strong belief: “In thoughts perturb’d they rose from the bright ruins, silent following/ The fiery king” (80). As a sympathizer of the French Revolution, it is quite probable that Blake wished to express the dissonance and incongruity between the British government’s policy and people’s attitude towards the French Revolution. Inspired by the revolutionary spirit overseas, Britain witnessed the creation of many political reform societies, such as *Friends of the People*, *Sons of Liberty* and *Friends of Man*, the *Corresponding Society* and other similar groups. By 1792, there were 87 branches of the *Friends of the People* in Britain and many were far more radical than the original group. (alternative-perth.co.uk) This profuse blossoming of radical societies demonstrates the English people’s unrest caused by the French Revolution and dissatisfaction with monarchy.

Understandably, the British government took severe measures to stifle the burgeoning stems of “English Jacobinism” that threatened the existence of monarchy. Blake bitterly denounces the censorship that is meant to steal away the freedom of the mind:

Every house a den, every man bound, the shadows are fill'd / With spectres, and the windows wove over with curses of iron;/ Over the doors 'Thou shall not,' & over the chimneys 'Fear' is written;/ With bands of iron round their necks, fasten'd into the walls / The citizens; in leaden gyves the inhabitants of suburbs/ Walk heavy; soft and bent are the bones of villagers (82).

The poet recollects the atmosphere of his times and alludes to the Royal proclamation of May 21 against “divers and seditious writings” that began “England’s black era of reaction and coercion” (Erdsmann 215).

In addition, the fear of the overthrow of monarchical power and of the revolution’s exportation in England determined the British government to manipulate public opinion by means of mass-media. Thus, the newspapers were trying to influence the British through shocking reports of democratic atrocities in France and through evidence of sinister French designs upon Britain (215). The “grey mist”, the youth of England who is “compell’d into the deadly night to see the form of Albion’s Angel”, the “aged ignorance” (*Europe* 81) that divorces senses from thought, indicate Blake’s awareness of the government’s efforts to impose their line of thought and make the population accept its version of the political events in France.

Though being an enthusiast of the French Revolution and an ardent supporter, Blake could not have agreed with all the radical changes that took place at the time, as they contradicted his firm conceptions of humanity and religion. Certainly he didn’t hold a positive opinion regarding the massive de-Christianization and crusade against religion that occurred in revolutionary France and even more so when it came about the institution of the Supreme Cult of Being. His critique of deism is visible in the depiction of the serpent-formed temple, this “image of infinite shut up in finite revolutions” that “gives light in the opaque” and “turns the fluxile eyes into two stationary orbs” (*Europe* 80). Nothing could have appalled and disillusioned Blake more than a Cult of Reason, given his appraisal of imagination and of the Human Form Divine, no matter the motivations behind it.

Last but not least, Blake draws upon the Bible in tracing the structure of the poem and in depicting Orc. Critics have unanimously identified the “secret child” in the beginning of the poem as Christ’s first coming and Orc’s war-like appearance at its end as his mature second coming eighteen centuries later, that is, after Enitharmon’s sleep of ignorance and tyranny ends. In this respect, revolution is compared to the apocalypse, both envisioning a hero/Christ coming to deliver people of the oppressed and make justice. Erdman notes the echo of Milton’s *Hymn on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*, for which Blake drew illustrations at that time (266).

After the endeavor of deciphering *Europe: a Prophecy* and *America: a Prophecy* Blake’s stance towards the French and the American Revolutions is transparent by now- he was, as Gilchrist put it, “a vehement republican and sympathizer with the revolution” (95). Similarly, the title of David Erdman’s book, “Prophet against Empire” is highly suggestive of Blake’s political

antipathies and commitments. Apparently, one doesn't need to be either French or American in order to be a supporter of revolution. One simply needs to have an acute awareness of the value of republican and democratic ideals and to be keenly perceptive of events occurring during one's lifetime that might have a lasting significance. Blake's literary account of these historical events is a worthy one because he experienced them directly rather than learning about them from others. He was anchored in the 'present' of the revolutions. His narrative represents a critical contemplation of fact, as well as an emotional response to a vivid impression. People tend to remember events that are vivid, novel, personal, emotional and that change their lives (Pennebaker, Gonzales 172). The French and the American Revolutions were probably the most 'vivid' and consequential events at the end of the eighteenth century, that changed the lives of people from both continents.

Secondly, his narrative is interesting and original because it is written from the perspective of an Englishman living in a monarchy. The reading of the two poems reveals a harsh critique of Albion, the embodiment of England, in both cases. Discussing people's memories of the histories of the national, ethnic, religious groups to which they belong, Blatz and Ross stress their selective presentations of history and biased portrayals of the past. People tend to choose versions of history that justify and glorify the actions of their own national, ethnic or religious group. Episodes that highlight the superiority of their ingroups are emphasized and those that are potentially damaging to the group's image are omitted (224). In this respect, the authors distinguish high identifiers, who are motivated to think favorably of their group, versus low identifiers, who are more neutral and show less bias in historical memory (228-229). Blake's memory of the revolutions seems to contradict this logic. Does that mean he is a low identifier or that his narrative is objective? The answer is no. His critique of Albion refers only to the monarchical government, with which Englishmen are shown to be dissatisfied or ambivalent in the best case. Blake is actually a high identifier, empathizing with the British's oppression and suffering and wishing they also benefited of the changes occurring overseas. His narrative is subjective as it manipulates historical memories in order to serve the poet's beliefs and to follow the essential revolutionary pattern of his thinking.

To sum up, it might be said that the memory of the French and American Revolutions contributed to Blake's intellectual growth and emergence as a poet. The events and experiences one witnesses, the emotional states one goes through leave marks upon his or her personality and are integrated within his/her knowledge. Memories constitute the self, in this case, the narrative self. Starting with the critique of monarchical tyranny, Blake will go on to speak against the tyranny of any creed or convention that limit man's freedom. In *Europe: A Prophecy* and *America: A Prophecy* Blake renders his vivid recollection of the French and American Revolutions that both occurred during his lifespan. In both poems, he recounts the course of the two revolutions with direct reference to and stress on Britain's involvement in them and its reaction and attitude towards revolution, which shows his high concern with the future of his nation. The poet evokes sites of memory, scenes of war, remarkable personalities that played major

roles in the historical events, as well as emotional states that dominated on both continents. Blake's memory of the revolutions is multi-layered, in that it is constituted out of historical facts, mythological figures and intertextuality. The poems did not enjoy wide circulation and popularity at the time because of the censorship against seditious writings. They have remained though as a legacy for posterity, reminding us of gigantic historical movements that have changed the course of the world.

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